By Dr. Suresh Kumar Mishra ‘Uratrupt’

. Wherever the Wind Blows

(Satirical Novel)

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Between the tempests of policy and the calms of indifference, there stalks a creature of our age: an Instagram zealot who photographs his supper before he tastes it, and a WhatsApp sage who, by forwarding trifles, hath become the greatest pundit alive. Where the true man is mislaid among these personae, none can testify. In the bustle to fashion a Digital India, the original India hath been mislaid; we have usernames in abundance and none to answer to our own names. In the virtual commonwealth we are princes, in the mortal one, paupers.

Our roads are so antique that the Archaeological Survey would do well to excavate them, to discover some Mohenjo-Daro of civil engineering. Before elections, governments promise pavements; after elections, they farm out the counting of potholes to the opposition. The villagers say, "This is no road, but the memorial of our forefathers—upon this they ascended to the other world; declare it heritage." The craters, being patriarchs themselves, collect rain and become ornamental lakes, where children launch fleets and frogs hold concerts. The engineer, a man of superior invention, declares these hollows not defects but water-harvesting systems. Yearly budgets pass; paper is spent; only the road remains unborn. The contractor reports, "We built the road, sir; it appears to have been stolen at night." And though highways cannot be pocketed, the money strolls away with admirable agility. Here, to walk the street is not locomotion but adventure sport.

Of electricity, what shall I say? She pays the village a ministerial visit—two minutes of darshan, a photograph, and vanishes. The bill, however, descends like a writ from a tycoon's mansion. Water? It comes less in taps and more in eyes. The slogan says "Water in Every Home"; the truth replies "Fire in Every Eye." The department assures us there is no load shedding—only load management; thus they dress the want of power in a French coat and bid us be grateful. At midnight, when all are

abed, the current arrives like an unseasonable guest and drives sleep away with its fanfare. By day, when needed, she absconds. Pipes are laid that convey not potability but bathability; a tank is built and then forgotten, like a monarch without a court. We gaze at its emptiness as believers at the sky.

There is in this village a temple, a mosque, and, most necessary of the three, a library. But alas: men have time to deposit merits in the temple, parade piety in the mosque, and broadcast counterfeit wisdom by telephone; only then, if Providence be idle, might the library be unlocked. The books feed the termites, while the villagers are nourished by the University of WhatsApp. Observe the wonder: the insects are becoming learned, and the humans bankrupt in mind. There are more devotees than devotion, more worshippers than prayer, more volumes than readers. Under the pretext of religion, we perform politics; under the pretext of politics, irreligion. Where books once stood, forwards now march. In place of knowledge, rumor; in place of education, delusion. The rats and termites still visit the library—not to read, but to dine. With the arrival of the smartphone, smartness took its leave; with the internet, intelligence absconded.

There is a government hospital, styled a house of healing, but it resembles a retired officer's mansion, dedicated to bats and ennui. The people call it less a hospital than a government house of sentence. To go thither is to have one's dignity put through a sieve. The resident physician, Dr. Rest Kumar, maintains his true clinic in town; his appearance in the village is as rare as the visitation of a post-election politician. He travels chiefly on paper. The compounder serves as the true medic, his degree awarded jointly by the neem-tree and a calendar publisher. Patients are admitted upon issuing a bond that, should they perish, no blame shall adhere to the doctor. Medicines must be purchased by the sick themselves; the hospital supplies only the bed, and that, the dust provides. "If you have money," say the nurses, "you may have

treatment; otherwise, deposit your hopes with God." The fees would purchase an air-conditioner in private practice; here, one may not command a fan.

There is also a co-educational government school, where the "co-" signifies this: the Sarpanch's buffalo and the master's salary are tied to the same peg. The buffalo provides milk; the master milks the system. The children are herded toward a Convent—stuck upon the village breast like a victor's flag—where the minds of the young are bred in a new strain. There, by the drill of English, offspring learn to deem their parents rustic; the latter, selling fields and mortgaging futures to pay fat fees, declare the transaction wisdom. In the government school, the buffalo's attendance is more regular than the master's. The cow comes daily to give milk; the master, monthly to bestow his darshan. Children mark their own roll-calls, and the Education Minister declares, "They are becoming self-reliant"—which here means, reliant upon no one but themselves. In the Convent, even Hindi is taught in English; thus children learn to mourn their mother-tongue.

Now the village hath more phones than hands and more steps counted than steps taken. To be smart is to store everything in the phone and nothing in the head. Where men once spoke face to face, they maintain their alliances by dispatching "Hello, how are you?" as a sacrament. For milk there is an app; for vegetables an app; and to borrow salt of a neighbor, a message. Citizens bear three instruments: one for the freeness of data, one for the fidelity of calls, and a governmental model for the dignity of queueing. They sit up by night to charge their devices, for the electricity visits only at those hours. In chartering a Digital India, we have mislaid the person who would cook our supper and ask us how we fare.

Our "smart village" once enjoyed a bus stand and, more occasional still, a bus—Hope Express by name. Hope, however, expired. A single circuit each day sufficed; the conductor opined that fuel was dear and altruism dearer. While it ran, the people

complained it was late, it was early, it was crowded; when it ceased, they praised the days of its mortality. Such is man: he values what he cannot have and complains of what he does. Presently the bus was "acquired"—some say sold, some scrapped, some transformed into a party-hall in a statesman's farm—and the stand became a stand indeed, where men stand to gossip, gamble, and gnaw. A teashop arose, whose proprietor dispenses rumor as though it were tea; platforms of stone appeared, upon which cards are played by day and politics by night; and a tavern styled "Surur," with a companionate smoking salon, both of which require no advertisement, for the customer advertises himself.

One day there appeared, in a convoy of dark spectacles and dust, the head of these grateful citizens, Bhokal Singh. Clad in white, chain of gold about the neck sufficient to shame a goldsmith, and Banarsi betel reddening his lips, he seized the microphone and proclaimed: "Brothers and sisters, from this day all in Surur is free! This is no drink but Poverty-Abolishing Nectar. Drink and live!" When poison is gratis, there is never a want of volunteers. His philosophy was simple: intoxicate first, then confiscate the senses. There emerged from his car four or five "security experts," who kept the peace of his vote-bank. This art is ancient: sow appetite, reap advantage. "They will promise you water," he cried, "I shall pipe beer to every threshold! My creed—Drink and Live; vote for Bhokal Singh!" The multitude discovered him to be a messiah; he was elected by a majority stupefied into gratitude. "I make no promises," said he; "I deliver first." And truly he had delivered every inebriation. On polling day the intoxicated pressed the correct button by the wrong faculties, and the result was styled "the love of the people."

Bhokal Singh now eats little food and much land; he says this is excellent for his digestion. The villagers, with their unerring instinct for greatness, praise him as a man "close to the soil." Each dawn he practices yoga—of acreage. One plus one

makes two; two plus two, four; four plus four, eight; in book-arithmetic he once failed, in ground-arithmetic he hath taken his doctorate. “To eat less,” he says, “is good for health,” and proves the maxim upon the property of others, which must cause wind in the stomach. He inspects his domains like a physician his ward. To him, every idle patch is obscene, and no obscenity should lie uncultivated. “He eats little,” say the people, which is true of his own plate.

This polity, like a pond, is governed by fish. The great fish subsist upon the small; they do not swallow them whole, which were rude, but cut them into lawful parcels and register each with a development name. Thus by degrees the belly is filled. Darwin is observed in the breach: “survival of the fittest” signifying not the most able but the most artful. Religion, caste, and improvement are bait according to season. Each little fish, considering itself safe beneath the big one’s fin, awakens to find itself within the big one’s belly. In this ecosystem, every leviathan hath room for ten fry.

As for the dog and its tail: great men may devour small, for they are great; small may not devour great, for they are small. The tail doth not wag the dog; yet in our nation the dog is persuaded he wags, whilst the tail hath him by the hindquarters. The people, believing they move their leaders by votes, discover in time they were being moved. The maxim of the mighty is “Confound and Govern.” By the time the small discern the game, the large are counting the winnings. There are but two choices for the small: to eat or be eaten. Vegetarianism is not a policy option.

In this world where tails wag dogs, there am I. My name is Indira—feminine to the ear, my sentiments at times more boyish to the mind. Gender, like grammar, delights in tripping us. I am a woman who walks the middle lane: sometimes this, sometimes that, sometimes both, sometimes neither. In the village, they suppose “LGBT” to be a sweetmeat; to converse of orientation is as to discourse of colors to the blind. They

preach that Heaven made but two sexes, as if the rainbow contained only black and white. I wear, as fancy and comfort command, a sari today and jeans tomorrow; my hair is cut short; my gait is sometimes a swagger, sometimes a sway. The people are confounded. “Is it a boy?” “Is it a girl?” “Be not perplexed,” I answer; “I am already sufficiently perplexed.” They imagine a man must inhabit the left, a woman the right, and no carriage may travel between; yet I proceed, quietly, in the median.

You may find my tale strange. Many discover themselves in youth; I became acquainted with myself in middle age. My heart consented; Society did not. If you differ even a little, they receive you as a visitor from Mars. “Be a man or be a woman,” they say; “the middle is unlawful.” Yet I stand in the gray, and when I speak of a spectrum, they reply that rainbows belong to the sky, not the ground.

Now to love, that magnificent confederate of truth and knave of hearts. Love is true when it arrives and false when it departs; would to Heaven we had a litmus for it. In commerce the customer is king; in love, a supplicant. One pays in eyes for eyes, in kidneys for kidneys, in heart for heart—and receives no receipt, no policy, no return. The leaves of trust are dry; a single match of doubt consumes the pile. Ashes have their destinations; memories are paid in installments and never amortize the principal. The people of our era cannot distinguish truth from falsehood; they prefer facts adjusted to taste. The market price of truth hath fallen; the premium on lies is dear.

What is death? A body that moves no more, or a life that walks away from its own dreams? The philosophers teach “again birth, again death,” and call Reality one and the rest counterfeit; yet in our country even Reality must procure an identity card, which is counterfeit too. To live is expensive; to die, dearer. The state taxes estates; the undertaker taxes the survivors; a man cannot afford to quit his troubles. We have made even departure a subscription service.

I confess that a certain night I sat awake and contrived an unwholesome project to resign from life. Our “advanced” age would market even this renunciation with packages and premiums; merchants would tier our sorrows and bill our farewells. I shall not dwell on the mechanics, which are both improper and unsafe, except to say that even grief is now priced, scheduled, and—like all services—subject to fees, surcharges, and delays. The multitude, no longer content to gawk for free, would have filmed and monetized my misfortune, sold the spectacle to channels, streamed it live, clipped it into reels, and captioned their pity with folded-hands. Professional crowds can now be rented by the hour.

The commentators would assemble, that parliament of jackdaws. One would cry, “Love failure!”—for love is now administered by subscription plans and cancelled by swipe. Another, an economist of the street, would argue that poverty is a rational motive for despair. A third would invoke examinations and the comedy of education: engineers who drive rickshaws, MBAs who vend betel, doctors who diagnose wallets. A fourth would invent a secret malady requiring ten tests and twenty scans, for the healing arts have learned to bill the ailment of fear itself. Thus would they perform their autopsies upon a soul they never met.

Why is there a column each morning for auspicious hours to wed, trade, or travel, and none for those who think of ending? Because the dead do not pay. Today, even the stars have gone online; one may purchase a horoscope for the next life with a coupon for this one. Let me postpone that research to my reincarnation.

When is the fit time to die—morning, noon, or night? Morning, say some, when each soul goes to its toil and one may slip away without inconveniencing the living. But now the school is in the house, the office is in the house, the world is in the house. Even sleep is taxed by cost and noise; the poor are bitten by mosquitoes at night and anxieties by day. We have no insurance for rest, though we insure our motor-cars.

I rose from my bed, shook off my languor, went to the mirror, and found another face staring back. They say the heart and the mirror never deceive; they deceive first, for both are trained in breaking, not in mending. Our mirrors have grown smart; our cameras paint us with filters until even a pup appears a lion. In this age, reality is an underperforming stock; everyone prefers virtual dividends. We flee the mirror that shows us as we are and pursue the lens that flatters us into oblivion.

Cont…(300 Pages)